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## Judge Oren Lewis Dies at 80; Noted for Bluntness on Bench

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U.S. District Judge Oren Ritter Lewis, a square-jawed, blunt-spoken fixture on the federal bench in Alexandria for the past 23 years, died late Sunday night after suffering a heart attack at his North Arlington home. He was 80.

Court personnel said Lewis collapsed at about 10:30 p.m. A private physician, called to the home alerted a rescue squad, which transported Lewis to Arlington Hospital, a hospital spokesman said. The spokesman said doctors were unable to revive him and he was pronounced dead at 11:37 p.m.

The hospital spokesman said death was due to heart failure.

Lewis assumed the semi-retired status of a senior judge in 1973 but continued to perform court duties almost daily. Last Friday morning, he presided over pretrial motions in his small, second-floor courtroom, and the day before he attended a private lunch with the three other federal judges assigned to Alexandria.

Judges and other court employees said yesterday that Lewis—known out of earshot as "Roarin' Oren"—recently had appeared healthy, fit and in the kind of feisty, outspoken high spirits that were his trademark among lawyers and his colleagues. "He drove me crazy," said one fellow jurist yesterday. "I'm going to miss him."

Despite the criticism of his courtroom style, Lewis was described by friends and admirers as fair-minded and a champion of the underdog. He was also skilled at verbal fencing. Asked in a recent interview if he had

any vices, Lewis said, "No. The statute of limitations has run out on all of them."

Off the bench, Judge Lewis was an avid gardener and golfer who liked to play bridge with the boys — "and the girls," he once said — and was devoted to his wife of 57 years, Grace Wells Lewis.

A Republican appointed to the federal bench by President Eisenhower in May 1960, Lewis held sway for a decade as the only U.S. trial judge assigned to Northern Virginia. In later years, as he grew

older and younger judges joined him on the bench, his role diminished. In the past year he had been assigned mainly to hear legal motions and one- or two-day trials.

During his tenure, Lewis presided over a series of important school desegregation cases in Arlington, Alexandria and Prince Edward County. While he was on the bench, Lewis also cleared the way for construction of Interstate 66, and presided over the criminal trials of the Pomponio brothers, who built much of the Rosslyn section of Arlington, and over the conspiracy trial of Dr. Murdock Head, the former George Washington University professor and founder of the Airlie Foundation.

Lewis became a legend in local legal circles for controversial opinions, fueled not only by his personal courtroom style, which was gruff and quixotic, but also by the controversial cases that came his way because of the court's jurisdiction over such sensitive federal preserves as the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency.

He was unsympathetic toward Pentagon antiwar protesters and once jailed author Norman Mailer after the mass demonstration memorialized in "Armies of the Night," Mailer's chronicle of the antiwar movement. Lewis also was the first district judge in the nation to jail an air traffic controller in the strike by controllers two years ago.

In 1978, Lewis ruled ex-CIA agent Frank Snepp had violated a government secrecy agreement in writing about the fall of South Vietnam and ordered profits from Snepp's book, "Decent Interval," frozen. "Nobody has got a right to divulge classified information," Lewis said from the bench. He told Snepp's ACLU lawyer that evidence in the case "won't make any difference."

A federal appeals court overturned parts of the Snepp decision, but the Supreme Court — in an opinion that still stands as a bar to such unauthorized disclosures — restored Lewis' ruling in full, adopting the judge's opinion as its own.

More recently, Lewis appeared to run afoul of the U.S. appeals court in Richmond with his controversial courtroom manner and his rulings from the bench. Earlier this year he was reversed three times in rapid sequence, in terms as

blunt as his own. One appellate decision noted "glaring errors" by the judge. Another cited rulings it said were "manifestly erroneous."

An avid talker, Lewis prided himself on cutting legal arguments short, usually with the impatient warning to "Get on with it." He boasted he had taken control of the court's docket in the days when he was

alone on the bench and never lost it. In line with Lewis' practice, the federal court he leaves behind has no appreciable backlog.

Born on Oct. 7, 1902, in Seymour, Ind., Lewis was the grandson of a lawyer and the son of a judge. He moved to Washington in 1923 when his father was appointed the first commissioner of the U.S. Court of Claims. He was a Navy veteran of World War I and a 1939 graduate of the George Washington University law school.

He worked for years in the newspaper business, serving as a circulation manager for the Washington Times-Herald and for Hearst publications in several cities. He was an owner of the Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax Journals from 1940 to 1961.

A former Republican Party chairman in Arlington, he was in private law practice from 1939 until he was appointed to the federal bench.

In addition to his wife, Lewis is survived by two sons, Oren Jr. and Robert Wells Lewis, five grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.